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Volunteers in the Courts News

Fall 2003

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Portage County launches peer court program

When a young man steps in front of his peers to talk about gang problems he is having, the entire class is put at ease by the knowledge that they are not alone. Recently, in a Stress Anger Management class in Portage County, a boy recounted how he decided not to fight back when a gang wanted to brawl. Later, at school, a group of friends tried to talk him into helping them take revenge. When he refused, he found that those who were true friends fully supported his decision.



Sasha Vieth

Judge John V. Finn

Sasha Vieth, Peer Court program director for Portage County, believes this is the kind of experience kids need to hear from their peers to validate these types of decisions. "I could see his story had a positive effect on others in the class," she said. "It helps others to hear someone their age discuss real-life issues and how they handled it."

The class is part of a peer court program that recently got underway in Portage County and already is a big hit. Organizers were hoping to start with 20 volunteers, but ended up with a group of 35. A panel of 31 volunteer students was chosen; they range in age from 14 to 18. Involving the community and keeping recidivism below 10 percent are the goals of the peer court. The Office of Justice Assistance is funding the pilot program through a grant for \$27,574. No tax dollars are used.

Organized and operated by the Boys & Girls Club of Portage County, the program took a year to plan and recently was approved by the Justice Coalition and Stevens Point Area Public School District. Judge John V. Finn, Portage County Circuit Court, helped to organize the peer court with the Boys & Girls Club and serves as chair of the Peer Court Committee. Finn appeared before the school board to explain the initiative. "He's been great," said Vieth.

Teen Court will be sorely missed

While Portage County is launching a peer court, others are struggling to keep funding. "Teen Court will be sorely missed" was the headline in Sheboygan when word got out that the Sheboygan County Teen Court program was officially cut. The program already had cut its hours in half over the summer due to budget constraints (see *The Third Branch*, [summer 2003](#)).

The program focuses on teens – ages 12 to 16 years old – who receive citations on school grounds. The most common cases the program expects to see are disorderly conduct, theft, and truancy. Cases that involve drugs or alcohol will not be referred to the peer court.

In Waupaca County, the story is the same. The teen court is losing funding and is currently not accepting new cases. Although one school district has offered to contribute \$1,000 to the teen court, other groups have withdrawn about \$35,000 in contributions since the Waupaca County Board voted against funding for the program in January.

The first sessions were held in October with four offenders coming before the newly created panel. An additional four were scheduled to appear in November. All four teenagers who went through the peer court in October are currently in the required life skills class, where the curriculum includes decision making, stress anger management, value of education, and traits of a leader. Some offenders could be ordered to perform community service, write an apology, work on projects related to the offense, or attend victim offender classes. The panel looks at each case individually to decide the sentence that juvenile must carry out.

The peer court also works on projects to raise awareness. At Halloween, for example, the volunteers organized a haunted house. Currently the program is working on a program called "Fatal Fad" to raise awareness of the dangers of tobacco. The volunteer panel is currently working on posters for this effort, but offenders could be assigned to work on this type of project in the future.

There are currently more than 30 teen courts in Wisconsin in the following counties: Barron, Bayfield, Brown, Buffalo/Pepin, Chippewa, Clark, Dane, Dodgeville, Fond du Lac, Iowa, Jackson, Jefferson, LaCrosse, Marinette, Oconto, Polk, Price, Rusk, Taylor, Trempealeau, Vernon, Vilas, Waupaca, Wausau, and Winnebago Counties.

For more information on the program contact Vieth at (715) 341-4386 or e-mail peer court@ameritech.net.

Victim impact panels are "powerful stuff"

In La Crosse recently, about 75 people who had been convicted a minimum of two times for drunken driving gathered to hear a presentation that the local judges hoped would put them on a better track.

The offenders heard from John Ottens, a quadriplegic who has spent the last 24 years in a wheelchair. He was injured when a drunken 18-year-old who was driving about 110 miles per hour broadsided his car. The driver, who had been bar hopping to celebrate his birthday, was killed in the crash.

"I'm only here because of you," the La Crosse Tribune quoted Ottens as telling the group. "I want to help you so that you or someone you love doesn't end up like me."

Joining Ottens in the presentation was Janet Dias, who drank with her boyfriend one evening in June 2000 and then joined him for a motorcycle ride that left her critically injured and killed him.

La Crosse County Circuit Court Judge Dale T. Pasell sat quietly in the back of the room during the meeting, watching the reactions of some of the offenders he had ordered to attend. "This is very powerful stuff," he told the newspaper. "We're doing our part to bring home the point that 'there go I, but for the grace of God.'"

La Crosse began holding these sessions, called victim impact panels, in 1997, and presents them four times each year. They are designed to give offenders an up-close look at the devastation that can result from drunk driving. Victims spend about an hour relating their stories as offenders

listen. According to an Outagamie County study, 14.7 percent of offenders who attended a victim impact panel committed another drunk driving offense; the recidivism rate among those who did not attend was 36.4 percent.

The University of Wisconsin Law School's Resource Center on Impaired Driving has published a reference manual on victim impact panels. To order a copy, call (800) 862-1048 or (608) 265-3411.

Staff attorney's carnival safaris boost charity

Staff Atty. Ron Hofer, Court of Appeals, District II, has an unusual hobby that provides stuffed animals for a children's cancer charity.

For more than 10 years, Hofer and his high school friend, Bob Clark, a small business owner, have been winning approximately 100 stuffed animals a year for the Women for MACC Fund (MACC stands for Midwest Athletes Against Childhood Cancer).

"I've always been fascinated by carnival games, and a dozen or so years ago, I began fabricating copies of them in my workshop. I focus on the ones that involve hand-eye coordination and skill,"

Hofer said. "Bob and I now have six or so games that we are very, very good at. And, of course, life holds few joys sweeter than beating a carny at his own game."



The minivan, after a particularly successful day at the fair.

For years, Hofer and Clark frequented the State Fair and church festivals, but recently, they rely almost exclusively on Great America, which has four of the games that they prefer. "We usually win 15-20 large or jumbo animals each visit, although our personal best was 37," Hofer said. "We lash them together with shoestrings, but even so, we usually have to hire kids to help us schlep them out to the truck."